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P-Morris, Donald R. ... The Washing ... The Spears (origin under Morris)

Chronicling the History Of the Zulu Nation

By Michael Kernan

It is virtually impossible for journalists to write about the Zulus—currently embroiled in the Soweto uprisings in South Africa—without adding the cliche "warrior-like."

And it is equally difficult to research Zulu history without running into a book called "The Washing of the Spears" by Donald R. Morris. This 670-page masterpiece of readable scholarship remains, after 12 years, the definitive account of the Zulu nation, documenting the legendary clashes at Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift and other places.

An amazing book, and not the least amazing thing about it is that it was written by an American, a CIA counterespionage agent with no particular training in history.

Morris read about the legendary tribe as a boy, but it was years later that as a hobby, he began researching a magazine article on the subject.

In 1955, taking time out from his researches, Morris ran into Ernest Hemingway, a friend of friends, in Havana.

"Hemingway said why didn't I tell the whole story of the Zulus. It had never been done."

So he started a chronicle of the nation, and the book soon became an obsession, dominating his nights and weekends for eight years, forcing him to track down and buy almost all his source books, leaving him drained each day from the rigors of a full-time job and four children.

"I'd read and take notes till 3 in the morning," said Morris, for many years a resident of Alexandria but now a columnist for the Houston Post. "I told my wife that if there was a fire she should save the manuscript first and the children second."

For the first five years he was stationed in Berlin, where he could find only secondary sources who fed on each other. Later he took a leave, flew to Durban, South Africa, for a month of steady work at the Campbell Library. He got in a second month on his return from an assignment in Australia.

Though the history of the "black Spartans" of the Zulu nation is fairly cohesive—from its rise in 1815 under the great visionary leader Shaka to its fall in 1879 through a war fomented by the extraordinary British adventurer-civil servant Sir Henry Bartle Frere—few of those who took part in it wrote much.

There are no written Zulu annals, and most early European notes on the subject are inaccurate and grossly biased. Memoirs of the soldiers who survived the battles range from useful to unfortunate. Even for a skilled historian, the obstacles were overwhelming.

Morris' original plan for the magazine article was to focus on the incredible stand at Rorke's Drift by 140 British soldiers, 30 of whom were incapacitated, against 4,000 Zulus armed with spears and some rifles, throughout an entire afternoon and night in 1879. Surrounded in a tiny corral behind feedbags, the men fought with guns, bayonets, clubs and bare hands, retreating room by room into the little field hospital even after it was set afire. The yelling, leaping charges of the Zulus stopped only at dawn when, decimated and starving, they abandoned the attack.

The epic struggle (11 Victoria Crosses were later awarded; it was far and away a record for a single action) was made later on the same day that the Zulu nation stormed their British enemies and killed 895 out of 950 British soldiers and some 550 Kaffir allies at Isandhlwana. This was the other side of the coin, an orgy of mental rigidity and incompetence. The two actions oddly resemble another pair of British military actions that took place mere hours apart: the gritted-teeth stand of the Thin Red Line at Balaclava and the idiot charge of the Light Brigade.

As Morris' research grew into the chronicle of the nation, he found that in order to understand the rise of Shaka he would have to include a history of Natal and 19th-century Southern Africa.

Morris said his editor was nervous but game as the outline expanded. "I certainly had no idea, for example," he wrote in a foreword, "that the story of the Zulu nation would take me as deeply into the history of the schism in the Anglican community . . ."

Along the way he turned up some odd bits: the deafness of Lt. Gonville Bromhead, one of the leaders at Rorke's Drift, a fact that went far to explain the man's remoteness and consequent unpopularity with his men, and details about Prince Louis Napoleon, the son of Napoleon III who was killed in a patrol action partly through his own romantic enthusiasm.

"The only really new thing there was the name of his horse and how he got it," added the slightly compulsive researcher.

The Times Literary Supplement said, "Not only is this the book to end all books on the tragic confrontation between the assegai (a hardwood spear) and the Gatling gun. It is a colorful yet commendably fair account of . . . Imperial policy in Natal on the eve of the Boer wars . . . unprejudiced analysis . . . an indictment of muddlers, cowards and self-seekers and a passionate apologia for all that was brave and honest on both sides of a pathetically ill-matched set of enemies."

Today the Zulus are the largest ethnic group in South Africa, and their chief, Gatsha Buthelezi, has been called the blacks' most prominent

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